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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 007073

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: DISCUSSIONS ON SOUTHERN TROUBLES WITH OBSERVERS IN SONGKHLA

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR SUSAN M. SUTTON. REASON: 1.4 (D)

[11](#). (C) Summary: During a one day visit to Songkhla in southern Thailand, Thailand Desk Officer and Emboff met with several prominent local observers to discuss the causes and possible solution to the area's ongoing turmoil. The observers were opposition Democrat Party (DP) MP Niphon Bunyamane, Prince of Songkhla University researcher Zakee Pitakumpol and Islamic Committee of Songkhla Department of Academic and Foreign Affairs Head Wisoot Binlateh. While none supported the separatists action, neither did they support Thaksin's approach to resolving the conflict, or the methods of the security forces. Each stated that Thaksin's often harsh rhetoric and strong-arm treatment by security personnel had alienated the Thai Muslim population and left them distrustful and fearful of the RTG's intentions. They also in large viewed the ultimate solution as better RTG recognition of the Thai-Malay culture, respect for Muslim schools, more spending on education and job training, and investigation of and trials for any government officials engaged in brutal practices against local civilians. End summary.

LOCAL OPPOSITION MP SAYS THAKSIN IS THE PROBLEM

[12](#). (C) Songkhla MP Niphon said that a political solution is the only option for the government. The "Oum Kha" or literally "take away and kill" methods many believe the police practice on separatist suspects has embittered the Thai Muslim population in the region and Prime Minister Thaksin's public statements on the situation too often has an incendiary effect. Niphon blamed the Prime Minister for the most recent surge of violence in the historically restive deep south by disbanding in 2002 a long successful joint Army-Police-Civil Southern Border Provinces Administration Center formed some twenty years earlier by Prime Minister Prem. This group had functioned well as both a center for intelligence collection and a conduit for grievances. Thaksin's replacement of this group with the deeply despised police destroyed the intelligence network and exacerbated tensions between the central government and the local population, Niphon said.

[13](#). (C) Niphon said that the public in the south is deeply suspicious of police involvement in the disappearance of local Thai Muslim's considered troublesome by the Thai authorities. Niphon claimed that at the time prominent Muslim lawyer Somchai Neelaphaijit disappeared in March, 2004, 105 persons had already disappeared under unexplained circumstances. By now, Niphon continued, the numbers had gone close to 300, with no credible investigation. Added to the distrust of the police are the "tough" comments by the Prime Minister that further alienate the Thai Muslim population. The government needs to win the population's trust, said Niphon, not exacerbate distrust of the government's intentions. Niphon also criticized what he viewed as Thaksin's war of words against Malaysia.

SEPARATISTS' AGENDA

[14](#). (C) Niphon said that the separatists are trying to drive a wedge between the Buddhist and Muslim communities by their attacks on monks and temples. Though the attacks have increased tensions, they have not yet gone so far as to destroy inter-communal relations in the south, he added.

[15](#). (SBU) Niphon listed steps he considers essential to resolving Thailand's southern conflict. These included:

- immediate cessation of "oum kha" operations by security personnel;
- decentralization of government
- more participation by all communities in the reconciliation process, including
  - local and religious leaders;
- double the budget for education;
- stop talk of banning religious pondok schools;
- provide more financial support for the pondok schools;
- more respect shown to Muslim teachers (ustaaads);

- reform the police and judicial system and institute better criminal investigation techniques;
- promote labor skills training;
- promote increased business investment in the region.

#### ISLAMIC SCHOLAR CITES WIDESPREAD FEELINGS OF INJUSTICE

15. (C) Prince of Songkhla University researcher Zakee Pitakumpol said that in his view, not much of the National Reconciliation Committee's (NRC) interim recommendations have been implemented by the government. He expressed his faith in the NRC, opining that if the RTG follows the NRC's interim and final recommendations, whatever they turn out to be, the situation will definitely improve from the present state of affairs. As in the case of Niphon, Zakee blamed Thaksin for the current violence, but also acknowledged that the separatists appeared to be trying to separate the Thai Buddhist and Thai Malay Muslim communities.

16. (C) Zakee said that there is a deep feeling of injustice felt by Thai Muslims in the region. Government talk of abolishing the Pondokos increases fears that the government is promoting the dominant Buddhist culture over the Thai Malay Muslim culture. What especially hurts the Muslim community is the lack of legal action against abusive authorities. In answer to poloff's question, Zakee said that a trial of those responsible for the deaths in custody of the 80 odd Muslims at Tak Bai would be well received by the Thai Muslim population as a sign of good faith. When asked what the U.S. could do to promote more respect for human rights Zakee answered that human rights training for the police would be a good area to consider.

17. (C) Zakee said that he agreed with a set of ideas advanced in a recent speech by former Prime Minister (and Deputy Prime Minister in Thaksin's first government) Chavalit Yongchaiyut. These points included the support of cultural and religious diversity; a step-back of opposing groups to allow discussion by representatives; promotion of stronger local government and creation of a separate administration zone status, such as enjoyed by Bangkok, in Pattani.

18. (C) When asked about the role of international jihadism on separatists, Zakee responded that there was likely some influence, but not much. He concluded, however, that the hardened attitude between the Thai Buddhist and Muslim communities created by the violence will take "a long time to heal."

#### ISLAMIC COMMITTEE MEMBER CALLS FOR RESPECT FOR THAI MALAY MUSLIM CULTURE

19. (C) Islamic Committee of Songkhla Department of Academic and Foreign Affairs Head Wisoot Binlateh said that the RTG is indifferent to cultural differences in the deep south. It looks at everything through the prism of economic development without seeing the cultural sensitivities that are affected by this development, he added. Unhealthy social vices inevitably accompany this development and it clashes with the largely rural and conservative Thai Muslim society. Wisoot added that in the public schools the Buddhist religion and culture is emphasized and the "historical realities" of the region are ignored. The government must accept these historical grievances and recognize the identity of the Thai Muslims. In response to a question on the introduction of a standardized curriculum, Wisoot said that Islamic ustaads should be the instructors to Muslim students in the Pondokos and that the curriculum must reflect the "true history" of the region.

110. (U) When pressed to offer a way to reduce the tensions between central authority and local religious leaders, Wisoot suggested that the government establish a religious training center for the ustaads. He also said that the government should set up a college to train religious leaders (Imams).

111. (C) Comment: Although these observers were not a complete cross section of opinion in the region, they represent significant political and religious constituencies. Their basic positions were close. While none supported the separatists action, neither did they support Thaksin's approach to resolving the conflict, or the methods of the security forces. Clearly, the government has a "hearts and minds" problem with many of those in the south that it is professing to protect. This situation will have to change if Thaksin hopes to achieve a real and durable resolution of the ongoing turmoil.

BOYCE